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REVIEWS

A History of French Architecture from 1661 to 1774. By Sir Reginald Blomfield, R. A. 2 Vols., 458 pp., 200 pls. London, Bell, 1921. £4, 4s.

Sir Reginald Blomfield has already shown himself a man of erudition and critical insight. His works on English architecture and the allied arts are in their thoroughness and depth of research a fitting background for the History of French Architecture. The latter work not only brings us a clear account of architecture as an art, but it also portrays in a surprising way the life, the work, the intrigues, the follies, the successes, and the failures of the men of the French Renaissance and Post-Renaissance. Even the costs and specifications of buildings, dug out of old documents with minutest care, are set forth with no trace of mustiness. The two volumes here reviewed form a sequel to Blomfield's earlier book on French Architecture from 1494 to 1661.

From the time of Colbert and the Academicians till the death of Louis Quinze—when architecture was immersed in the human broil of revolution—architecture had a trend which, though at times it became desultory and without power, was able to maintain a pace that harked back to François I. With the death of Mazarin the work and training of the architect was reformed under the able hand of Colbert. "Colbert," as the author puts it, "knew as little about drawing as a washer-woman!" But his virtues as a manager far exceeded his defects as an artist. For, as a great executive leader and by the grace of Louis XIV he managed to put a remarkable amount of new spirit into French Architecture. In the organization of the Academy of Architecture, and later in the French Academy in Rome, he allied himself with men not always artistic but of sagacious and practical demeanor, such men as would be helpful in promoting stability of purpose and conduct. With such an aim and with nothing but the glory of the king to satisfy, Colbert

succeeded in establishing a faith in French genius that has lasted to the present day.

Blomfield tells, with mature deliberation and criticism mixed with spontaneous vigor and enthusiasm, the tangled story of the brilliant, spectacular, and foolish reign of Louis XIV, which was only slightly mitigated in its audacious wastefulness in the reign of Louis XV. We read of Le Van, the first real architect of the period; of Bernini, the Italian, who made plans for the Louvre; of Claude Perault and his jealousy; of François Blondel, that great critic and scholar of classical art; of Errard, the first director of the French Academy in Rome; of André le Nôtre, the gardener of the Tuilleries; of Mansart, the most *successful* architect that ever lived (though by no means the *greatest*); of Daviler, who on the way to Rome was captured by pirates and carried off to Africa; of J. J. Gabriel, "the ablest architect of his time . . . an artist of vigorous imagination, competent in all technical details, an architect who, without in any way sacrificing the dignity and breadth of classical design made it alive and human;" of Meissonnier, with his extravagance; of Boffrand, who "almost tempts one to think that he regarded architecture as an immense practical joke" and who "having lost all his money found himself unable to retrieve his fortunes from the portraits and snuffboxes with which princes and bishops were in the habit of rewarding his services;" of Ange J. Gabriel, who outdid his father in skill, and whose Petit Trianon is recognized as the finest expression of French architecture. Not only does the author delve into the personal elements in these men's lives, but he evaluates them as artists, as engineers, or as pretenders.

In the latter part of the second volume he devotes himself to the reign of Louis XV in particular and to the last efforts of the old régime in general. Of the old régime, that of stupendous and magnificent neo-classicism, he says, "Its architecture, at once so supple and so strong, remains a gracious memory of the past that we can never now recover." And again, "since those days architecture has wandered first in one direction, then in another . . . the latest revival has been that of ponderous classic."

The two volumes are replete with illustrations, chiefly from old engravings, though there are also a number of charming drawings by the author himself. Photographs have been discreetly avoided. The buildings are represented as the architects conceived them, as their contemporaries saw them, and not as the modern generations have ruined them.

Having sought his material in original documents, Sir Reginald Blomfield has put fresh spirit into his work and has written his history without that hackneyed depression which characterizes so many commentaries on the past.

R. E. Lyman, Jr.